

## He is with Them Still 3 EASTER C

There's a scene from the Oscar-nominated film of last year, *Blood Diamond* that's provocative. The movie is set in 1999 in Africa while a civil war rages. The conflict is fueled by diamonds that are sold to pay for weapons. Danny Archer, the anti-hero, a mercenary with scarcely a conscience, who along with good guys and bad guys is hunting for this huge pink diamond. The Revolutionary United Front meanwhile, is leveling and tormenting entire villages.

In a quiet moment of reflection as chaos explodes around them, Danny Archer chats with a journalist, and reveals that his "Mum was raped and shot and ... Dad was decapitated and hung from a hook in the barn. He says, "Sometimes I wonder ... will God ever forgive us for what we've done to each other? Then I look around and I realize. God left this place a long time ago."

When events like the carnage at Virginia Tech happen, it shatters our quiet, innocent world, it intrudes upon our psyche, it saddens and shocks, and we wonder if indeed God hasn't left this place a long time ago. And what of Easter: what evidence is there that Jesus is transforming the lives of people who destroy others lives?

Are we surprised?

It's happened before: Columbine, which was followed by other schoolyard shootings in subsequent years around the country. The Amish country last fall, postal shootings, workplace violence, the McDonalds massacre a number of years ago, the Texas clock tower murders of 16 passersby by Charles Whitman, the Manson murders, and more.

We all know how violent our country is and yet we choose to live with it.

Yet, it can be transformed. It is for this reason we are an Easter people. It is despite this very violence that Jesus lived, died and overcame the violence that was done to him.

In the lesson from the book of Acts, Ananias is commissioned by Jesus to lead an enemy named Saul to a cure for his blindness. When Ananias overcomes his fear of Saul's power and authority to hurt and destroy he is able to carry out his mission. He is able to accept that God can change Paul and transform him from Saul of Tarsus to Paul the apostle.

Ironically, the Lord tells Ananias to go to the street called Straight, where he finds Saul of Tarsus, lays hands on him and proclaims the good news, that Saul's vision of Jesus Christ is true. On the street called Straight, Saul finds orthodoxy and his sight is restored.

Both for Ananias and Paul, God is in that place. And Jesus truly is the Risen Lord.

We have the means to change the violent, the lonely and angry young people who have learned to resolve their pain by the harm and horror they put upon the rest of us. The irony is that as Americans we are averse to risk taking. We try to protect ourselves from EVERYTHING AND ANYTHING. This impulse tends to overlook the luxury of being able to protect ourselves from what are sometimes harmless dangers -- compared to the real horrors we too frequently ignore or to which we turn a blind eye -- which our fellow human beings endure incessantly.

Of such horrors, mental illness is among the least treated of recognizable diseases. Yet it can if ignored kill and traumatize so many.

We know what to do. Judy Muller on NPR's "Morning Edition" the day after Virginia's shootings recalled a remark made to her following the Columbine shootings. A woman at the 'makeshift memorial' of flowers and teddy bears that appeared almost immediately said, "The really sad thing is that we already know what to do." Muller went on to talk about all the public rituals that follow such events. We've done it before. We've buried our children.

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## WHAT WOULD JESUS HAVE US DO NOW?

The answer to this question is in the Gospel text for this Sunday.

It's Eastertide. If you're feeling like "God left this place a long time ago," you're right. It's Eastertide. The tomb is empty. He left THAT place, only to wait for us in a NEW PLACE.

The opening verse of the Gospel reading says that "Jesus showed himself again to his disciples."

THAT'S what Jesus wants to do this Sunday morning with us: To show himself again to us and encourage us. The gospel says, "And he showed himself in this way."

So WHAT WAY is Jesus going to show himself to us today?

In the midst of their trials Jesus invites his disciples to eat and have conversation. He says after the catch of fish, "Come and have breakfast." In the midst of grief and loss Jesus also comes into our lives to bring us comfort and understanding. He shares with us our sorrow and pain.

The Senior Minister at Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Fairfax, Virginia, says that his congregation has seven VT students-all unharmed-and a number of VT grads among their members is working with his staff to gather Virginia Tech students, along with their families and friends, for an evening of conversation and prayer. It's so important to respond to these events as a community and to look for where God is at work in the aftermath of violence and death. "We need to affirm that God always gives the gift of new life," he says, "and that God can reclaim Virginia Tech as a place for kids to grow in knowledge and faith."

On April 16, God was watching with sorrow and pain as the story unfolded. He wept just as he did when Lazarus died. God did not leave that place a long time ago, but was more present than ever with the victims of Virginia Tech. He is still with them now. He is with those at Mission Control in Houston.

How can we respond if such tragedy strikes our community? Pray that we might be prepared to gather our community for breakfast and prayer. Pray and be ready to carry out a disaster plan that brings the good news that Christ is Risen to those who feel that God has left them. We know what to do. God help us to be ready. Amen.